

Pragmatic Language

What is pragmatic language?

Pragmatic language is the use of appropriate communication in social situations (knowing what to say, how to say it, and when to say it). Pragmatic language involves three major skills:

Using language for different purposes such as:

- Greeting (Hello. Goodbye. How are you?)
- Informing (I am leaving.)
- Demanding (Say "Good-bye." Pick up the toy.)
- Stating (I am going to the playground.)
- Requesting (Do you want to go along?)

Changing language according to the listener or the situation, such as:

- Talking to a teacher versus talking to a baby
- Speaking in a classroom versus talking in the cafeteria
- Talking about family to another family member versus a stranger

Following rules for conversation, such as:

- Taking turns while talking
- Introducing new topics
- Staying on topic
- Continuing the same topic as the other speaker
- Re-wording when misunderstood
- Using and understanding nonverbal signals (facial expression, eye contact, etc.)
- Respecting personal space



What causes a pragmatic language disorder?

Although a specific cause of a pragmatic language disorder is not known, the problem is related to dysfunction of the language centers of the brain. Difficulty with pragmatic language can exist on its own, in combination with other language problems, or as part of another diagnosis such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

What are the characteristics of a pragmatic language disorder?

Children with a pragmatic disorder may demonstrate a general language delay. They may have trouble understanding the meaning of what others are saying. They may also have difficulty using language appropriately to get their needs met and to interact with others. In addition, children with a pragmatic language disorder have trouble using language socially. As a result, they have difficulty joining in on social play, working with others at school, or just interacting appropriately with peers. Because of these difficulties, they may appear rude at times, and they may have difficulty keeping friends.

The child with a pragmatics disorder may:

- not understand that we take turns when we talk.
- not be able to read the nonverbal cues that the listener sends.
- not realize that the listener has no background knowledge of their topic.
- not stay on the topic. Therefore, the child may say inappropriate or unrelated things during a conversation.
- not understand the importance of giving enough background information. Therefore, the child may say something like “He did it the other day” without any reference to whom or what he is talking about.
- not understand abstract language. Therefore, the child may not understand riddles, jokes or figures of speech.
- not be able to understanding the main idea in a conversation, story, or direction.

What is the treatment for a pragmatic language disorder?

Speech therapy is often needed for the treatment of a pragmatic language disorder. The speech-language pathologist can be a great coach for pragmatic language skills. He or she will assess the child, and then formulate goals that are individualized to meet the child’s specific needs. Because social communication skills are often the concern, group therapy is often recommended so that therapy can be done in real communication situations.

What can parents do to help?

There are several ways that parents and caregivers can help children use language appropriately in social situations. These suggestions can be adapted for children of any age.

- Practice greeting before starting a conversation and ending a conversation appropriately.
- Help the child to identify the topic of conversations and stories that he tells and that he hears or reads.
- Tell the child a story using pronoun (he, she, it) without letting the child know who they refer to. Tell a story but don’t give enough information. Have the child tell you what is missing for him to understand.
- Have the child tell a story or about something that happened. Ask questions of the child when not enough information is given. Help the child understand why you needed more information.
- Role-play a situation where a child has to explain the same thing to different people, such as a younger child, his grandmother, a teacher, etc. Talk about things that are appropriate to say and those that are inappropriate for each listener or situation. For example, “May I...” versus “You have to let me...”
- Practice nonverbal cues, such as smiling, frowning, looking away, rolling the eyes, etc. and have the child tell what that means.
- Show how nonverbal signs are important. Talk about what message is sent when someone crosses his arms, rolls his eyes, or frowns while listening or speaking.

Website on pragmatic language:

- ASHA: www.asha.org/public/speech/development/Pragmatics.htm.

For more information, please contact the Division of Speech Pathology at (513) 636-4341 or visit our website at www.cincinnatichildrens.org/speech.