

Professor Pamela Snow

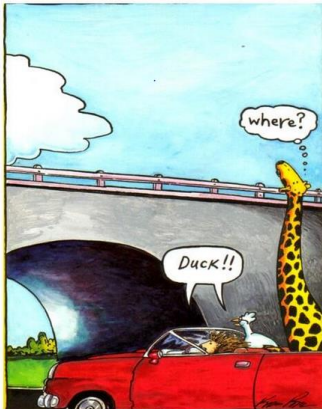
La Trobe Rural Health School, Bendigo

*Communication skills and vulnerable young people:
Lessons learned from young people in youth justice, out of
home care & alternative education*

YouthAOD Conference
Melbourne, August 18, 2017.

In this presentation


- What is language?
- How is language development influenced by early environment?
- Why is language development important?
- What do we know about vulnerable young people and language skills?
- What can you do differently?


Which of these developmental disorders have you heard of?

- Autism spectrum disorder
- Intellectual Disability
- Fragile X Syndrome
- Down Syndrome
- Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder
- Cerebral Palsy
- Dyslexia
- Developmental Language Disorder

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ORAL LANGUAGE ?

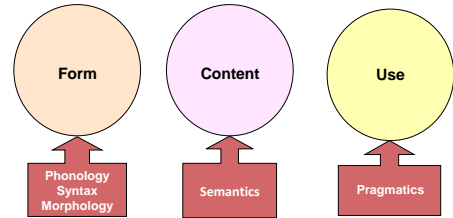
Everyday talking (expressive)
and listening (receptive /
comprehension) skills



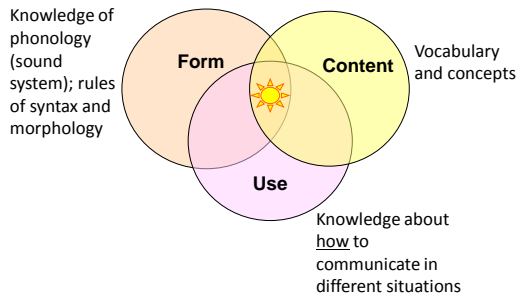
Language is a two-channel process



Building Language as a Communication Tool



Language consists of many component skills



Language and the company it keeps

- Thinking
- Feeling
- Reasoning
- Problem-solving
- Predicting
- Remembering
- Perspective taking
- Moving from the concrete to the abstract



Language development and early mental health

- ✓ Importance of the **interpersonal space**
- ✓ Reciprocity and **responsiveness**
- ✓ “Motherese”
- ✓ Being **child-led**
- ✓ Emotional **warmth** and **attunement**
- ✓ Development of **empathy & perspective taking**
- ✓ Linking of **emotion words** to **self regulation**
- ✓ **Social cognition**



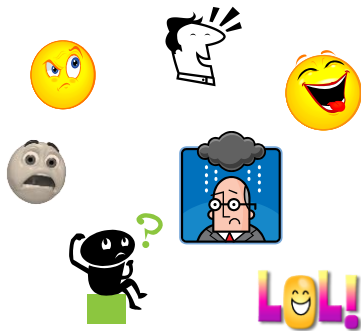
Social cognition

- ❖ Humans are socialised to “play against” their emotions in order to maintain face
- ❖ Therefore we need to identify and “read” subtle affective cues that may be at odds with verbal cues
- ❖ Need to read, assess, and respond to cues in real time, and monitor their effects (and effects of our adjustments) on the interaction
- ❖ Susceptible to developmental stage and a range of clinical disorders



Surface and hidden meanings

- ▶ *Similes*
- ▶ *Metaphor*
- ▶ *Idiom*
- ▶ *Jokes*
- ▶ *Sarcasm*
- ▶ *Analogy*
- ▶ *Irony*



Language and culture



What's going on here?



Language is used to.....

- | | | |
|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Tell | <input type="checkbox"/> Agree | <input type="checkbox"/> Suggest |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Ask | <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree | <input type="checkbox"/> Inquire |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Inform | <input type="checkbox"/> Sympathise | <input type="checkbox"/> Persuade |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Instruct | <input type="checkbox"/> Advise | <input type="checkbox"/> Cajole |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Narrate | <input type="checkbox"/> Clarify | <input type="checkbox"/> Imply |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Request | <input type="checkbox"/> Comment | <input type="checkbox"/> Admonish |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Influence | <input type="checkbox"/> Apologise | <input type="checkbox"/> Concur |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Argue | <input type="checkbox"/> Suggest | <input type="checkbox"/> Complain |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Praise | <input type="checkbox"/> Imply | <input type="checkbox"/> Refute |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Criticise | <input type="checkbox"/> Counsel | <input type="checkbox"/> Question |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Object | <input type="checkbox"/> Direct | <input type="checkbox"/> Amuse |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Confer | <input type="checkbox"/> Entertain | <input type="checkbox"/> ...and so on |



- Talking to peers
- Talking to teachers
- Talking to elderly relatives
- Talking to shop-keepers
- Talking to the boss
- Talking to police
- Talking to a help-desk
- Barracking at a football match

Are these
all the
same?

The skilled communicator's secret weapon





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Not all social cues are easy to read



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Disorders that can compromise language skills*

* May or may not be diagnosed

Congenital disorders, e.g.

- Genetic conditions such as Down Syndrome, Fragile X and other forms of ID
- Conditions associated with *in utero* exposure to neurotoxins, such as Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder
- Autism-spectrum disorders
- Sensory impairment (esp. hearing loss)



Acquired disorders, e.g.

- Traumatic Brain Injury (falls, road trauma, abuse)
- Infection (e.g. meningitis)
- Maltreatment – abuse and/or neglect

Developmental Language Disorder – can occur alone or with any of the above

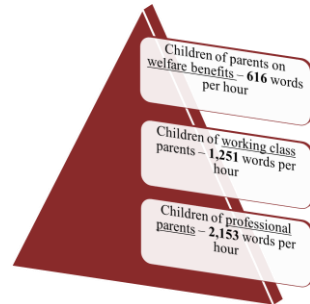
Some disorders are obvious, others are not. Comorbidity is common

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Language exposure and the social gradient

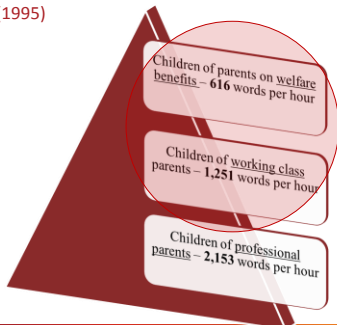
Hart & Risley (1995)



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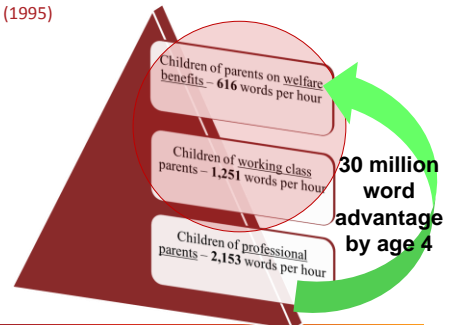
Language exposure and SES
Hart & Risley (1995)



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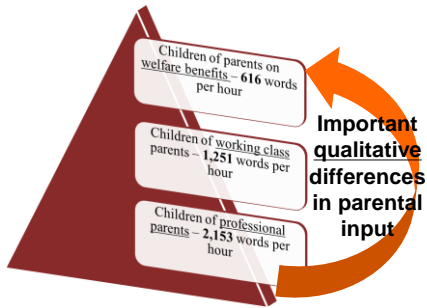
Language exposure and SES
Hart & Risley (1995)



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Language exposure and SES
Hart & Risley (1995)



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Remembering that...

- ❖ Not all low SES families provide linguistically under-nourishing environments
- ❖ Not all high SES families provide linguistically enriched environments
- ❖ Language skills are related to human and social capital, not just economic capital



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A task for you.....listen carefully to the instructions



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Language is a paradox

- ❖ Humans have evolved a special facility for oral language, such that it is innate. **BUT**
 - It is highly vulnerable to a range of developmental conditions, e.g. hearing impairment, intellectual disability, autism spectrum disorders, brain injury;
 - It is highly sensitive to genetic factors and environmental exposure.



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Reading difficulties in adolescents

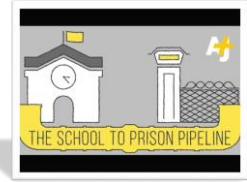
- Common in vulnerable adolescents
- Can be a source of shame / embarrassment
- Often co-occur with mental health/behavioural issues
- Create avoidance / resistance
- Do not indicate low IQ
- Often reflect disrupted education
- Do not necessarily indicate "dyslexia"



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What does all of this have to do with young offenders?



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The pathway to offending

Male:Female ratio of 5:1 (Higher in custodial settings)

Over-representation of

- Single-parent households – absent fathers
- Dysfunctional communication / parenting
- Parental mental health problems
- Involvement with child protection services
- **History of behaviour / conduct disturbance**
- Low educational attachment / attainment
- School exclusion
- Developmental disability (diagnosed or not)
- Low SES
- Intergenerational un/under-employment in parents
- Early initiation into substance use / abuse
- Early death



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Implications for language development?

Male:Female ratio of 5:1 (Higher in custodial settings)

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Research studies on the language skills of young offenders



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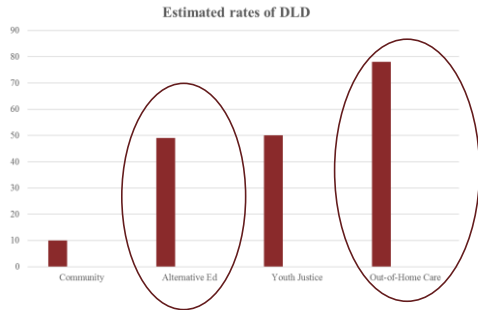
Language competence in young male offenders i.e. vulnerable young males

- ❖ Australian (Snow & Powell) and overseas research indicates 50-60% of young male offenders have a clinically significant, yet undiagnosed LD that cannot be explained on the basis of low IQ, disability, or mental health problems
- ❖ Links exist between LD and past history of interpersonal violence
- ❖ Higher rates of LD in young people who enter the Youth Justice system via Child Protection
- ❖ Higher rates of LD in young people from ATSI backgrounds (even when Standard Australian English exposure is controlled)
- ❖ High rates (57%) of alexithymia – problems finding words for feelings
- ❖ **[Higher rates of LD in young female offenders, though less so than in males]**

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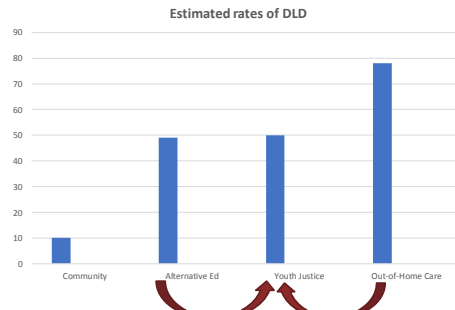
Rates of DLD (according to CELF-4 Core Language Scores below average range)



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Rates of DLD (according to CELF-4 Core Language Scores below average range)



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Language Disorders occur in

- Expressive domain
- Receptive domain
- Vocabulary
- Syntactic complexity
- Figurative/idiomatic language
- Narrative skills

- Literacy skills



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Language difficulties make it hard to

- ❖ Tell a story (e.g. provide evidence; speak up for oneself)
- ❖ Consider listener perspective (i.e., judge what the listener needs to know / already knows / may not already know)
- ❖ Use specific vocabulary (instead of “you know”, “thing”)
- ❖ Understand idiomatic / figurative language, even at a simple level
- ❖ Get a joke / discern good humour from intended offence
- ❖ Be an assertive communicator who can share the load, e.g., can
 - ❖ Correct a mis-understanding on part of the other speaker
 - ❖ Avoid and / or repair inadvertent offence
 - ❖ Reflect on one’s own communicative competence



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Talking about feelings

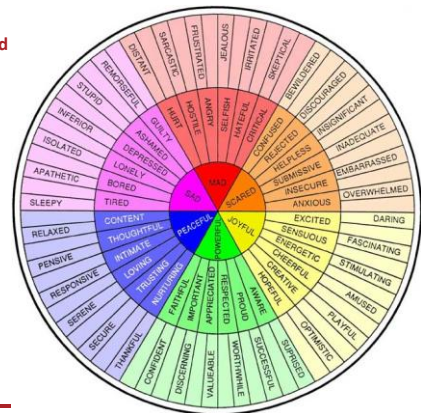
- A “higher-order” communicative skill
- Draws on a range of cognitive, psychological and social factors
- Alexithymia = Lack of words for one’s own emotions
 - Typically associated with autism spectrum disorders
 - May also occur in children who have been victims/witnesses to trauma
 - May be important in forensic context
 - Easily missed / misinterpreted by clinicians, teachers etc



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Emotions and their words



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Implications for

- Early intervention for “high-risk boys”, esp where behaviour disturbance + learning difficulties are present
- Forensic / School Interviewing / Understanding the court process e.g. bail conditions; school discipline decisions / contracts
- Restorative Justice conferencing
- Interventions for young offenders
 - Counselling, Anger Management Programs
 - Literacy Programs for marginalised young people



Boys with behaviour problems + learning difficulties

=



Communication, behaviour and trouble with the law

- Behaviour **is** communication
- Behaviour problems are serious MH issues
- Many children with behaviour problems have unidentified language difficulties
- Behaviour may communicate a skill deficit, and/or complex unmet emotional needs
- Behaviour problems often comorbid with low reading progress
- Need for professionals to collaborate closely and consistently
- Suspension and exclusion?
- **School-to-Prison Pipeline**



Language Problems are invisible



Language problems may masquerade as

- ⚠ Rudeness
 - ⚠ Indifference / lack of concern
 - ⚠ Poor motivation to cooperate
 - ⚠ “Yep, nup, dunno, maybe”...and other minimalist responses
 - ⚠ Suggestibility / Over-compliance in forensic interviews, whether as suspects, witnesses or victims
 - ⚠ Behaviour disturbance
 - ⚠ Low IQ
 - ⚠ Lack of genuineness / authenticity
- No language impairment at all**



Common idioms young people may not understand

- He’s a dark horse
- Barking up the wrong tree
- Stealing your thunder
- Calling a spade a spade
- Having a stiff upper lip
- A chip on your shoulder
- A bird in the hand’s worth two in the bush
- Making heavy weather of it
- In the eye of the storm
- Put your money where your mouth is
- Walking on egg-shells
- Don’t rock the boat



What can you do? (1)

- Remember that behaviour is a form of communication
- Assume that language skills (expressive and/or receptive) are compromised
- Slow everything down
- Recognise that minimalist responses may be the best the young person can do
- Simplify your own language:
 - Avoid idioms, metaphors, sarcasm, double entendre, jokes
 - Avoid multi-stage instructions / questions
- Minimise distractions for important interactions
- Allow extra time for processing and responding

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What can you do? (2)

- Use simple written props for important concepts and conversations – literacy levels are likely to be low
- Get the young person's attention before engaging
- Carefully select open-ended questions e.g.
 - “How confident are you about this”?
- Vs
 - “Do you understand”? -> Invites Yes/No response
- Paraphrase information to assist with comprehension
- Show interest and engage when the YP opens up
- Learn to respond to cues (verbal and non-verbal) that a YP would like to tell you more

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What can you do? (3)

- Remember that fatigue and stress worsen cognitive and communication skills
- Be careful with asking YP to paraphrase
- Remember that YP go to great lengths to conceal language difficulties, expressively and receptively, but some of their strategies are counter-productive e.g.
 - Avoidance
 - Aggression / rudeness
 - Apparent disinterest
 - Mucking around
 - Mocking

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The Snow Report <http://pamelasnow.blogspot.com.au/>



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