

## Semantic and pragmatic disorders

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### What are semantic and pragmatic disorders?

Children with semantic and pragmatic disorders are often first identified because of their unusual language characteristics. Children may have difficulty understanding some words, phrases and sentences, and use others oddly or inappropriately. They often show signs of limited social development and play.

'Semantic' refers to the meanings of words and phrases. 'Pragmatic' refers to knowing what to say when, and how to say it to other people. These are complex areas of language learning and use. Frequently, professionals refer to 'semantic-pragmatic' disorders, combining the two terms into one. This can often make good sense, but we should guard against assuming that the label suits all circumstances (Gagnon, Mottron & Joannette, 1997). That is why the terms on this glossary sheet are split – 'semantic and pragmatic'.

Some communication specialists prefer to consider children with pure semantic problems under the headings of 'receptive language disorder' and 'higher level language disorder'. In combination, semantic and pragmatic problems will often centre on working out the topic of the sentence. The children often know the possible meanings of a word, but can not work out how it is being used on a particular occasion.

Some words which refer to concepts such as feelings ('sad', 'puzzled', 'jealous') or status ('important', 'official') can be particularly hard to learn. There may also be difficulty with non-literal use of language such as, 'Cut it out!' (for 'Stop it') or 'She's a push-over'.

Children with pragmatic problems have difficulty using language in a social context. They do not seem to understand how we take turns when we talk, they interrupt more than is acceptable and make little effort to keep conversations going by saying little things such as, 'Yes', or 'What did you do?' They sometimes seem unaware of what their partner needs to know and can say too much or little about the subject. Their conversation is often felt by the other person to be inappropriate or irrelevant. Children with pragmatic

difficulties may also use their language for a more restricted range of purposes than do the rest of us: asking, directing, recounting experiences, working out puzzles, imagining, predicting, and so on.

Semantic problems often blend into pragmatic difficulties. For example, the children will interpret a message quite literally. In the case of the question, 'Can you open the door?' the child might reply, 'Yes' without moving a muscle. The child has treated the request to open the door as a question about their ability to do it. This is normal at a certain stage of development, but is something the child should grow out of as they develop.

Rapin and Allen (1987) said that the following characteristics describe children with a semantic-pragmatic disorder:

- fluent, well formed sentences
- verbose with adequate speech articulation
- literal interpretations often alongside a good vocabulary
- use scripts in situations (that is, they say the same thing each time)
- they say more than they are capable of understanding
- problems with turn-taking and knowing what is being talked about
- going round the point, being unclear of what they are saying

### References

**Botting, N** (1998), Semantic-pragmatic disorder (SPD) as a distinct diagnostic entity: Making sense of the boundaries. *European Journal of Disorders of Communication*, 33(1), 87–90

**Gagnon, L, Mottron, L, & Joannette, Y** (1997), Questioning the validity of the semantic-pragmatic syndrome diagnosis. *Autism*, 1(1), 37–55

**Johnson, A M, & Susnik, J L** (1995), *Social Skills stories: Functional picture stories for readers and non-readers K–12*. Solana Beach, CA: Mayer-Johnson Co

**MacKay, G, & Anderson, C (Eds.)** (2000), *Teaching children with pragmatic difficulties of communication*. London: David Fulton

**Rapin, I, & Allen, D A** (1987), *Developmental dysphasia and autism in preschool children*. *Proceedings of the First International Symposium on Speech and Language Disorders in Children* (pp. 20–35). London: Afasic

**Rinaldi, W** (1995), *Social use of language programme: Enhancing the social communication of children and teenagers with special educational needs* (2nd ed.). Windsor: NFER/Nelson

**Please note: Afasic does not hold copies of any referenced material. However, it may be obtained via academic libraries.**

## Other relevant Glossary Sheets

- Autism (7)
- Asperger's syndrome (11)
- Pervasive developmental disorders (16)
- Higher level language disorder (13)
- Comprehension or receptive language difficulties (22)

## Other organisations which can help

**ICAN**  
4 Dyer's Buildings  
Holborn  
London  
EC1N 2QP  
Tel: 0870 010 40 66

The psychological service of your local council. Details appear in the business section of the telephone directory, under the council's name and 'Education'.

The speech and language therapy service of your local health board or trust. Details appear in the business section of the telephone directory, under Health and the name of the board or trust.

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