

What is Pragmatic Language?

- Pragmatic language refers to the rules we follow when we communicate in social situations. It changes depending on the context, for example the setting/situation we're in or the people we're talking to.
- Pragmatics, also referred to as social communication, encompasses nonverbal communication such as facial expressions, gestures/body language, and tone of voice. It has to do with the function (/purpose/use) of language rather than form/structure.
- Social communication may include eye contact, turn-taking, topic maintenance, interpreting body language, and awareness of personal space.

What does a pragmatic language difficulty look like in school?

- Students with pragmatic language difficulties may not comprehend more subtle aspects of communication. This may include understanding characters' points of view or emotional reactions in stories or staying on topic when giving an oral answer or writing an essay.
- As mentioned, students may have difficulties writing essays or with other aspects of written (or oral) narrative language. In particular, they may be challenged to take the perspective of their reader (or listener) and thus neglect to provide necessary background information for the reader to fully comprehend. They may have difficulty understanding others' (e.g., authors') perspectives as well. Additionally, they may be challenged by making connections between academic material and their own lives.
- Further, students with pragmatic language disorders may have difficulty with comparing and contrasting, synthesizing information, and cause-effect relationships. They may be challenged to make predictions and other types of inferences. They may have difficulty paraphrasing, summarizing, identifying main idea, and separating important and unimportant details. In other words, they may "miss the forest for the trees."
- Students with pragmatic language deficits may not understand indirect language, such as, "Do you want to check over your quiz?" or "Why don't you get a tissue?"

- In addition to indirect language, students with pragmatic language challenges may have difficulty comprehending other types of nonliteral language such as figurative language and multiple meaning words.
- Younger students with pragmatic language deficits may show difficulty with eye contact, interpreting facial expressions, turn-taking in both play and conversation, and maintaining a conversational topic.

How can Speech-Language Pathologists help?

- When a student's pragmatic language is impacting his or her social and/or academic success, a Speech-Language Pathologist can work on:
 - Helping the student learn to use context-dependent language.
 - Teaching strategies for determining whether someone is using figurative language and how to interpret that language, particularly similes and metaphors.
 - Teaching students various idioms.
 - Creating a “common language” that can be used across environments (e.g., speech room, classroom, home).
- Considerations:
 - Social communication happens throughout the day. The student’s entire team must be involved in order to make the greatest impact on the student’s progress.
 - School-based psychologists, guidance counselors, and social workers may also target social and pragmatic goals.

How can teachers and parents/guardians help?

- Model “self-talk” or your own internal dialogue (e.g., “think-alouds”).
- Role-play conversations.
- Look at pictures of faces/expressions/emotions.
- Make figurative (or abstract) language concrete, for example, by saying, “That’s an expression. It means...”.

- Practice conversational skills during mealtime.
- Verbalize your emotions, for example, with respect to conversational topics (e.g., “I’m getting bored talking about trains.”).
- Practice rephrasing to repair communication breakdowns, for example, “Did you mean...?”.
- Balance “screen time” with time talking to humans.

References

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