

Tips for using imitation to help language development and learning:

CHILDREN



Research findings to help in designing support for language development and learning

Relevant to therapists and carers of neurotypical and autistic children and children with Developmental Language Disorder (DLD)

- Both neurotypical and autistic children are influenced by their conversational partners' language: what they hear [input] affects what they say [output]
- A conversation partner's choices can support these groups to use words and grammar that they would not use independently: they imitate, or align with, their partners' language choices
- These effects can be lasting, and can support learning grammatical structures and word use

WORKING WITH CHILDREN



VOCABULARY CHOICES

- Typically-developing children as young as 3 years repeat their partner's word choices in a structured game. They use a word they would not normally use (though they already recognise the word). Autistic children show the same benefit.
- We've developed methods that can be used by caregivers as well as professionals to provide structured opportunities for implicit imitation: e.g. the structured snap game: edisnap.com/

GRAMMAR

- Typically-developing (TD) children as young as 32 months repeat their partner's grammatical structures in a structured game. Autistic children show the same benefit. Children with DLD also show a benefit, but to a smaller extent.
 - ▶ they use complex structures such as **passive verbs** after hearing their partner use them
 - ▶ these effects increase within a session, and last over a week
 - ▶ the benefits seem to be the same for both younger (3yrs) and older (5yrs) children
- Interacting online (e.g. a Zoom call) is helpful for language alignment in young TD children in the same way as interacting face-to-face (though possibly to a lesser degree).
- In online interactions, a partner's language has the same effect on a child's language whether or not the child can see (or just hear) their partner.
 - ▶ But younger children are less engaged when they can't see their partner.
 - ▶ And children may produce fewer complex structures in online interactions.

Our structured snap game edisnap.com/ and shared interactive book game can be used by caregivers as well as professionals to provide opportunities for children to imitate – and so consolidate – targeted vocabulary and grammar



The WeChat and LEAD projects studied how neurotypical and autistic children, and younger and older adults, change their language depending on what they hear.

<https://blogs.ed.ac.uk/leadproject/>

<http://wechat.org.uk/>