Understanding Emotional and Behavioral Challenges in Childhood: The Role of Language Skills

Marissa Montano

Abstract

A variety of challenges related to emotion, behavior, and language are common during childhood. The co-occurrence of Language Disorders (LDs) in children with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders (EBDs) is well documented in research. The lack of awareness and understanding about the language and communication skills of children with EBDs creates significant barriers to timely identification and appropriate service provision for this population. The following research contributes to discussion on the role of language skills in relation to the emotional and behavioral challenges that children with EBDs are known to exhibit. Evidence supporting the underlying role of language skills in children's emotional and behavioral functioning is described, and the need for Speech-Language Pathologists (SLPs) to advocate for, and intervene in services for this population is addressed.

Profiles of Children with EBDs & LDs

- Increased risk for social difficulties, unemployment, substance abuse, poverty, incarceration, and poor quality of interpersonal relationships
- Increased risk for academic failure, specifically in reading/writing and difficulties with teacher and peer interactions
- Rely on behaviors to express themselves when their language abilities are unsuccessful
- Poor social competence and higher levels of hyperactivity
- Poor topic maintenance, shorter utterances, and inappropriate responses
- Difficulties in language comprehension and pragmatic language

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Language &amp; Communication Development</th>
<th>Emotional/Behavioral Development</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Infancy</td>
<td>• Acquire the sounds and patterns of native language through environmental input</td>
<td>• Rely on caregivers for emotional support in stressful situations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Develop understanding of communicative intention through caregiver interactions</td>
<td>• Learn to self-soothe and regulate attention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Establish concept of turn-taking</td>
<td>• Improve coordination of expressive behaviors as they relate to emotions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toddlerhood</td>
<td>• Increasing verbal comprehension and expressive vocabulary</td>
<td>• Emergence of self-awareness and consciousness of emotional responses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Increasing length of communicative acts</td>
<td>• Exhibit basic forms of prosocial action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• New communicative intents include symbolic play, requesting info, asking questions, teasing.</td>
<td>• Ability to discriminate between others’ emotions and their meanings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preschool</td>
<td>• Use and understanding of WH questions and semantic relations</td>
<td>• Access to language facilitates continued self-awareness and supports self-regulation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Increased use of language during play</td>
<td>• Increased pragmatic awareness of facial expressions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• New communicative intents include reasoning, predicting, expressing empathy, maintaining interactions.</td>
<td>• Improved understanding of social transactions and insight into others’ emotions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Importance of Language

- Fundamental role in relationship formation, regulation of interactions, and socialization
- Allows children to communicate with others, express thoughts, feelings, and solve problems
- Supports ongoing cognitive development
- Essential for educational and social success
- Foundation for competence in social, emotional, behavioral, and academic performance

Role of Language in EBDs

- EBDs and LDs can be seen as cumulative problems
- LDs serve as the primary catalyst for problematic social interactions between children with EBDs and their caregivers, teachers, and peers
- Early language problems predict later behavior problems
- Reciprocal relationship between language skills and emotion/behavior relies on initial language development
- Self-directed language regulates and guides behavior to facilitate problem solving
- Language processes and aspects of self-regulation are associated with neural circuits in the frontal lobes
- Language ability has a stronger effect on behavior problems than behavior problems do on language ability

Implications for Speech-Language Pathologists

- Improve understanding about the characteristics of children with EBDs and LDs and comorbidity risks
- Educate on how behaviors and emotions translate to communicative intentions
- Children with EBDs should always be screened for language
- Emphasize early intervention, timely identification and appropriate service provision

TREAT THE CAUSE, NOT THE SYMPTOMS

Directions for Future Research

- Further investigation on the specific contributions that language development has on emotional/behavioral learning and functioning
- Establishment of an evidence base for appropriate interventions and effective approaches to service delivery for children with EBDs and LDs
- Improvements in the quality and quantity of standardized assessments to increase identification of children with EBDs and LDs in need of services

Purpose

This Capstone Project reviews the available literature examining the relationship between EBDs and LDs in early childhood, in order to better understand the role of language skills, and discuss implications for SLPS’ involvement with children from this population.

References